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ABSTRACT

Understanding how laughter communicates helps to explain how individuals respond to laughter in intercultural situations. There are three manifestations of laughter: reflex responses to particular physical stimuli; automatic reactions to informative stimuli that can be intentionally controlled; and symbols encoded with semantic meanings significant to the sender and the receiver. Symbolic laughter is voluntary, so there is wide variation in the sender's awareness of intent. In intercultural situations, reflex laughter is the only manifestation whose meaning is constant and understood across cultures. Automatic laughter is highly ambiguous, because it relates to the repressions of the individual and socially learned behaviors. Within groups that are heterogeneous, automatic laughter will not necessarily function to unite the group and establish or reinforce norms. On the contrary, automatic laughter may be disruptive, creating misunderstandings and tension. Only when people share the same attitudes or overcome their differences will they laugh together spontaneously, sharing the benefits of the experience. Symbolic laughter between individuals from different backgrounds may not be understood at all. Since it is intentional communication, symbolic laughter depends on context for correct interpretation. Laughter, therefore, is not a universal language, though it is used similarly within all cultures. Rather than providing a pleasant means of communicating, laughter is risky, open to misinterpretation, and a reminder of cultural differences. (RL)

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LAUGHTER AS COMMUNICATION:

SOME INTERCULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Laughter is viewed as communication. The three manifestations of laughter as a reflex response to physical stimuli, an automatic response to informative stimuli and as symbolic communication are presented. The link between laughter and tension and hostility is investigated and its function at a social level is discussed; the implications for cross-cultural exchanges are examined.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo presenta la risa como comunicación; enfoca las tres manifestaciones de la risa como un reflejo a un estímulo físico, una respuesta automática a un estímulo informativo, y como comunicación simbólica; examina la relación entre la risa y las tensiones y hostilidades y sus funciones a nivel social; y, finalmente, presenta las implicaciones interculturales para la comunicación.

If laughter were merely a response to particular stimuli, it would be sufficient for a student of communication to ask "What makes people laugh?" Such psychologists as Freud and philosophers as Bergson addressed that question early in this century and those in the fields of communication and psychology (Goldstein, 1976, Winick, 1976, Ullian, 1976) are still examining those stimuli which provoke laughter. However, laughter is itself more than a mere response to stimuli, whether physical or informative. As Hertzler (1970) noted "it is frequently overlooked that a great proportion of the contacts between human beings which involve the transmission or exchange of meanings are, in part, supported or supplemented by laughing, or smiling, in place of or in addition to, other means of communication." Thus, to the student of communication the phenomenon of human laughter poses another question: How does laughter function as human communication?

All human beings share the potential for laughter which is usually realized around the fourth month of life. Laughter, therefore, is common to all cultures. It is necessary to understand how laughter communicates in order to explain the response of individuals in intercultural situations to laughter. We laugh because it feels good and because the act of laughing brings pleasure, releasing tension and other pent-up energy. Because it is closely linked with the release of repressed tension and hostility, whether it is intended to communicate a particular idea or not, laughter communicates to the listener about that tension or hostility. Individuals from a similar background, for whom consensus is high, will more likely be able to understand the laughter. Those who are outsiders, and for whom consensus is low, will be more likely to misinterpret the laugh and, if they already feel self-conscious, different, or excluded from the group, they may feel that the hostility expressed by the laugh

is directed at them. Such is often the case in intercultural situations. To examine this topic I shall define laughter as a variable of symbolic communication; discuss the association between repression and laughter; and address its implications for communicative events involving individuals from different cultural groups.

There are three principal ways in which laughter is manifest. First, some laughter does not require conscious attention on the part of the laughter nor is the conscious intent of the individual required for laughter to occur. Laughter can be a reflex response to particular physical stimuli. Secondly, other laughter is an automatic reaction to informative stimuli which can be intentionally controlled. Thirdly, laughter can be encoded with semantic meaning which is significant to the sender and the receiver of the message. Such laughter is voluntary on the part of the sender with a greater or lesser degree of awareness of intent.

Pavlov's conception of human mental processes made it possible for us to understand better the psychological aspects of laughter. Pavlov proposed three distinct signal systems: the sub-cortical signal system; the first cortical signal system; and the second cortical signal system. The sub-cortical signal system is common to all animals and consists of reflex activities which take place without the need for mental processing of information. The coughing reflex to objects being caught in the throat is an example of the sub-cortical signal system. The first cortical signal system is made possible, as Dance and Larson (1972) explained by "the addition of elaborated cerebral-neurological structures in higher animals." Thus, through receptors such as those of sight and hearing the organism responds. Pavlov concluded that man alone had developed the second cortical signal system which depends on the presence of the cerebral cortex. The action of laughing can be considered as a function of each of the three

signal systems. Laughter may be a reflex response to physical stimuli, as in the case of tickling. It may be a spontaneous response to particular informative stimuli or it may be consciously initiated and terminated while holding a variety of specific meanings. The relationship between the three levels of laughter and Pavlov's signal system is diagrammed in Figure 1.

Levels of Laughter	*Pavlov's Signal Systems*
Symbolic Level	*Second Cortical Signal System*
Automatic Signal Level	*First Cortical Signal System*
Involuntary Signal Level	*Sub-Cortical Signal System*

Figure 1

Relationship between the three levels of Laughter and Pavlov's Signal Systems.

Reflex Laughter

Federic Stearns (1972) divided laughter into three similar manifestations: laughing as a reflex, laughter as a psychosomatic response, and laughing as a psychosomatic phenomenon. The first manifestation, laughing as a reflex, may be associated with Pavlov's sub-cortical signal system. Reflexive laughter in response to tickling signals that one is experiencing the sensation of physical stimuli to sensitive areas of the body. Particularly in children, this reflex response to tickling is involuntary and therefore cannot be controlled or stopped until such time as the physical stimulus ceases or becomes excessively painful. Such laughter is an aspect of the central nervous system and the neuromuscular pathway is described in detail by Stearns (1972).

Automatic Laughter

Unlike reflex laughter, which must be stimulated by another individual and is usually done so intentionally by the one who is tickling, in the case of a laughing response to informative stimuli, an individual may intentionally induce laughter by communicating something which is significant to the audience and to which, in the particular situation, the appropriate response would be laughter. Much humor, particularly humor which is disparaging, fits into this category. However, such informative stimuli as incongruent or unusual behavior may evoke laughter in an audience without the intention of the actor. The individual responds to the event with laughter through a mental process which links the perceived situation to events one remembers from the past or which one anticipates for the future.

However, the informative stimulus which evokes a particular laugh need not always be sent by another person. Indeed, one's repressed

wishes, fears, and desires may automatically evoke laughter when they are triggered by memories, fantasies, or one's perception of the current situation. The employment of laughter as such a versatile response allows it to develop a range of implications and eventually to take on symbolic significance. Laughter, which is an automatic response to stimuli, parallels the first cortical signal system described by Pavlov.

Automatic laughter has received much attention since it is frequently a response to humorous stimuli. The studies of Bliss (1915), Bergson (1924), Brody (1950), Bergler (1956), Grotjahn (1957), Hertzler (1970) and others indicate that the pleasurable feelings associated with laughter may be directly linked to reduction in hostility and release of tension. Bergler's study (1956) of the laughter of children showed that the child demotes what was once frightening to the level of funny and thus, at least consciously, overcomes those particular fears through laughter. Bliss (195) considered the laugh to be an expression of repressed emotions, needs and desires, since these are the things of which we are afraid. What we repress are the tendencies which are not consistent with social norms, sex and aggression being the primary sources of most human conflicts and tension. Grotjahn (1957) also viewed the laughter situation as a way of temporarily releasing strong hostile feelings, feelings of agression or defense, or sexual desires which an individual has repressed. Thus, laughter provides a release from the restraint of repressed sexual or hostile feelings, which might otherwise be expressed in antisocial behavior, and the laughter, as a response to informative stimuli, has a therapeutic effect on the human organism.

On the one hand, laughter is accompanied by pleasurable sensations for those who laugh while it affords them the opportunity to give vent to hostility and taboo feelings in a manner which is considered socially

acceptable. According to Freud (1905), hostility and obscenity form the basis for much humorous stimuli and thus both the encoder of the wit and the audience who laugh are able to give vent to hostility and aggression through laughter.

By laughing together individuals communicate that they share a common attitude to the situation and build a feeling of comradery and support. Individuals who do not laugh with the rest of the group feel separation and rejection. By not participating they identify themselves as differing from the group's attitude and do not share in the physical benefits (such as oxygination of the blood, and increased pulse rate) of the laughter.

The view that laughter stems from some deep-rooted fears of desires leads one to conclude that certain symbolic stimuli which are associated with those fears or desires will activate the neurological mechanisms which exhibit laughter. Such responses may be involuntary and spontaneous and much humorous stimuli fits into this category. The kinds of stimuli which produce such as response will vary between cultures and groups. Even within individuals, what induces laughter on one occasion may not do so on another. When we laugh we bring to that moment memory, perception and foresight.

Symbolic Laughter

The development of laughter as symbolic communication is dependent upon and inextricably linked with the use of speech for significance, abstraction and thought. When the human infant discovers the symbolic significance of culturally determined language, then all human sounds, including laughter, are potentially communicative. When we are able to ask, What did you mean by that laugh?, we have learned to attribute symbolic significance to the laugh. Once people recognize that laughter

is linked with the release of energy and the repressions and fears of individuals, they are able to interpret the significance of laughter. Thus, it is at the symbolic level that the laughter of one culture will differ from that of another, since their uses of language differ. The development of the power to terminate laughter voluntarily indicates that an individual has learned to attribute symbolic meaning to laughter.

Language consists of significant symbols--particular stimuli which take on arbitrary meanings that sometimes assume the same meaning for both the sender and the receiver. Laughter can become a significant symbol which communicates, among many things, approval, disapproval, enjoyment, embarrassment, or satisfaction. More often, the meaning which is attached to a laugh is reflective of the repressed emotions which are released by the laughter. Thus, laughter becomes a vocal symbol which carries with it meanings that a listener can understand. Since laughter is so closely related to repressed feelings and attitudes, it may not be socially acceptable to encode the message using the more arbitrary symbols of language and speech communication.

Experience and perception teach the individual that laughter holds more significance than just a "play mood" or "feeling of well being". The extent to which laughter is a voluntary revelation of one's fears and attitudes is directly related to the amount of symbolic significance the laughter may convey. Automatic laughter, when one is discussing one's plans for the evening, may be a response to the discomfort experienced by the one who laughs because the discussion is becoming too personal. On the other hand, in the same situation, a voluntary laugh may convey that the person who is laughing would like to be doing something in particular with the other individual. In this case, taboo or sexual implications may be intended on the part of the laugher and understood

to be intended by the other individual. Often, the explicit expression of such intentions is taboo in our society and so laughter is used as a means of communicating when sexuality is the topic of conversation.

One may speculate that an individual whose verbal and non-verbal skills are highly developed would make frequent use of laughter in this manner, as symbolic communication because laughter, as voluntary symbolic communication, involves a high degree of self awareness on the part of the one who is laughing. The person is then able to select laughter appropriate to a particular situation and holding specific significance for both the one who is laughing and the person who listens.

Laughter as Communication

As a symbol the meaning of laughter is abstract and contextually flexible. Laughter as an automatic or voluntary response to informative stimuli is, however, culturally determined. Individuals, when they learn the significance of language, at the same time learn appropriate response patterns to particular stimuli, and specific informative stimuli trigger the laughing response. Such a response may be accompanied by the release of energy as a result of feelings of superiority, hostility, or tension; the perception of an incongruity; or the experience, simultaneously, of incompatable emotions.

Thus, even though the laughing response is a learned one, it need not be voluntarily or consciously initiated either by the one who laughs or the one who causes the laughter. Automatic laughter occurs as a response to particular informative stimuli and it is often possible for the laugher to terminate this type of laughter at will. Such a response to informative stimuli is the result of specific, learned, efferent pathways to the brain and it presupposes learning and memory, and is determined by them.

It is easy to see that because laughter is closely linked to our fears and repressions that the use of laughter centers around situations in which personal risk is involved. The variety of laughter, however, and the pleasurable feelings which accompany the release of tension and pent-up energy, make it extremely ambiguous. Only the individual who is laughing can determine whether the laugh is automatic or voluntary and even that person may not always be sure. The meaning encoded in symbolic laughter is often too dangerous to be explained in more explicit verbal communication. To the listener, there always remains the possibility that the individual did not really feel the repressed though revealed feelings at all. People are seldom asked to account for the factors in a situation which "struck them as funny", and there are few who can face and examine the repressed feelings which induced the laughter. That, of course, is why they responded to the stimuli with laughter in the first place--to avoid confronting those feelings and thoughts. It is this ambiguity which makes laughter such a safe response to stimuli, but one easily misinterpreted.

Because our laughter is so closely related to our own repressions and fears, without being aware of it, it communicates implicit meanings and we are judged by others on our laughter. It is not unusual to hear someone remark that they dislike or don't trust a person because of their laugh. Even by listening to the laughter of a group, many people can accurately detect the "color" of the jokes being told. As these illustrations point out, although a response to stimuli, laughter is itself a stimulus to which other individuals respond. The laughter which is considered healthy in one culture may be viewed as rude or vulgar by another group, and so what may be appropriate laughter on one occasion may be inappropriate on another. Laughter establishes a link between

people by conveying general information about an individual's state of being or more specific symbolic content.

Even if all individuals hold the potential for laughter, the extent to which they execute that privilege is determined by such factors as age, sex, nationality, race and social norms as well as the expectations and norms of one's particular cultural group. Human beings are born with the genetic capcity to laugh: it is a learned response to specific stimuli and children learn when and how to laugh by imitation. A small child, hearing parents and friends laugh will often laugh with them not understanding the significance of the laughter. When imitating the laughter, the child will benefit from the physical attributes of the action. Laughter stimulates respiration and the circulation of the blood, raising the blood pressure and, consequently, sending more blood to the head, brain, and the digestive system. Through practicing in this way, the child soon develops an understanding of the appropriate occasions for laughter.

By participating in the laughter event, individuals define their membership in the group and their laughter becomes a means of communicating acceptance and agreement with the sentiments and attitudes proposed in joking situations. It releases tensions and negates fears. Laughter also communicates hostility and disapproval, and therefore is an extremely powerful weapon. Judging things on the basis of what is normal or customary, groups can use laughter as a defense against learning and change. Laughter, as a weapon for negating ideas and people, is a means of reducing dissonance provoked by the novel or strange. People laugh when they reject new information and ideas because these are not compatible with one's present limited focus. Thus, laughter can be a means of remaining in ignorance at the expense of change. On the other hand, through the very same negation, the group may be strengthened and the

members may gain a clearer understanding of the kind of behavior the group expects of them and a deeper feeling of commitment and belonging.

Since laughter is a means of confronting change, we laugh at or in response to situations we find unfamiliar. Through such a release people have at their disposal a means, if only a temporary one, of dealing with cognitive-dissonance. Possibly because cahnge or the novel conflicts with our preconceived notions about our environment, and laughter is a means of reducing our emotional reaction to the unfamiliar, as tourists we laugh at much that we confront. If we laugh at the peculiar looking person they may go away or change and leave us in our familiar or expected environment. However, once the fear or anxiety created by the novelty has been released through laughter (or exposure) we are then able to accept its presence. Thus, laughter is a means of resolving cognitive-dissonance and retaliating against the ideas, actions or situations which created the dissonance.

The energy-releasing properties of laughter make it an adequate weapon against frustration and fear. Often, when confronted with information which may make one somewhat embarrassed or afraid, or which causes frustration, a person tries to turn the situation into a joke, releasing the emotions through laughter. Particularly in intercultural situations, where tension is high, however, the probability of misunderstanding this type of laughter is great. There is a tendency for individuals to perceive the hostility revealed by the laugh as directed at themselves or the state or organization they represent. One particular example of this type of misunderstanding occurred at a foreign embassy to the United States where two American businessmen, who were frustrated by the poor service, the difficulty in obtaining information and the lack of consistency in the information they had received from different embassy employees,

were laughing together about the data they were putting on a personal description form. The clerk perceived the laughter, which served to release the tension of the businessmen, as revealing hostility toward the embassy and he retaliated by becoming defensive and rude.

Laughter, though not always shared by other group members, communicates to the group. A laugh in isolation may function to release tension and dispel fear, especially that fear associated with embarrassment which results when one feels different or inferior because one is not meeting the social expectations and norms which the person attributes to the group. People sometimes laugh when they are in danger or perceive themselves to be threatened in some way. Laughter in the face of embarrassment is a particular example. People who feel embarrassed are prone to laughter and it is probable that such laughter is a means of dispelling fear and negating or objectifying that which is instilling the fear. The person who laughs is attempting to lighten the mood and perhaps lighten their own burden of embarrassment.

This type of laughter is frequently used during the introduction of strangers or when people meet again after a period time. Such encounters are usually accompanied by feelings of tension and self-consciousness, however repressed or weak they may be. The individuals are conscious of their differences and may feel some degree of embarrassment or fear. By laughing, they release some of that tension and communicate that release, and acceptance and friendliness. This type of laughter is usually muffled and indistinct and is often accompanied by or follows a handshake. Perhaps of the addition of this tactile communication, or because the laugh itself is directed inwards, laughter in these situations is seldom minunderstood and it functions to reduce the tensions of the meeting, to break down barriers and open the individuals to further communication. Laughter

resulting from feelings of embarrassment either alone or in the company of others, is an attempt to eliminate those uncomfortable feelings--to expel the energy which accompanies the embarrassment and to negate the object of the uncomfortable feelings.

Since laughter is a mechanism for the release of tension and pent-up energy one would expect to find manifestations of the phenomon in situations of intercultural exchange. As mentioned above, laughter is commonly manifested in greetings between strangers. In this situation laughter is used by individuals from a number of cultures and, therefore, since it is a predictable and perhaps even an anticipated response to the situation the individuals who are involved in the communicative event interpret it as appropriate behavior and do not feel threatened or attacked by the laugh, but rather, become more comfortable and experience a greater sense of participation through the partial release of tension.

Laughter, however, is not a sign of fear so much as a sign of the repression of fear. When a person responds to fear with laughter they are saying, "I am not afraid. I am laughing because I do not feel threatened." What the individual is attempting to do is to avoid or repress the emotions of fear which they may be feeling. Laughter provides the medium for repression since, rather than directly confronting roots of the problem, the individual avoids confrontation and releases the tension through laughter. The threatening situation exists, but to the one who laughed, the message transmitted to the world is that the object or situation causing the fear is not of any consequence. If the laughter is completely successful, the person will no longer feel threatened, afraid, or frustrated.

Whenever people laugh, they do so for themselves to hear. Laughter dispels fear and embarrassment and prevents people from displaying repressed emotions too plainly, while at the same time vocalizing them. The

causes for laughter may be so deeply rooted in our subconscious, and so closely entwined with our repressed desires and wishes, or antisocial attitudes, that we may be unaware of the hidden motives behind our laughter. Yet, through laughter we are able to vocalize those emotions in an environment of social approval.

When people laugh they hear and, at least at the level of the unconscious, understand the messages encoded in their own laughter. They may be communicating to the group that they do not feel threatened, embarrassed or afraid, but by doing so they are also telling themselves that they will not act afraid or embarrassed. Thus, laughter functions as intrapersonal as well as interpersonal communication. The laughter limits the individual to behavior consistent with the overt information being communicated. In so doing it reduces the options available to the individual and reinforces appropriate role behavior.

Laughter at the Social Level

Laughter is perhaps the easiest and most pleasant instrument the human family has developed for arriving at consensus. People enjoy laughing together and they seek out opportunities to do so and as Hayworth (1925) observed seldom laugh alone. The significance of the laugh is generally affected by the context in which it occurs especially when the laugh takes on abstract meaning. Even when they may not be laughing for the same reasons, people tend to join in when the group around them is laughing. Such laughter allows individuals to appraise whether their behavior is consistent with what they perceive to be the attitudes and norms of the group, giving a person the opportunity to check personal behavior against the yardstick of the group by comparing their own laughter with that of others. Using laughter as symbolic communication to convey

information to others facilitates the ability to understand the messages encoded in the laughter of others and by decoding the messages correctly transmitted with laughter a person is able to anticipate and predict the future behavior of others. Since the response of automatic laughter is culturally learned, however, it will often be expressed by one individual or group in response to particular informative stimuli and the response will seem inappropriate to individuals who are not part of that group. The most common interpretation given to such laughter by the outsider seems to be that the laughter is being directed at oneself or at one's group. They are able to perceive in the laughter that it is a release mechanism for tension and hostility and they interpret that hostility as being directed at themselves. Since these individuals are already aware that they are outsiders and are already experiencing a reduction in the effectiveness of their communication, a situation in which they may be being laughed at is frustrating and disquieting and causes them to feel hostile and alienated without offering them the opportunity to vent these feelings through participation in the laughter event. That they perceived the situation incorrectly is not learned by the individual until later. As they come to understand the other group better, and become able to identify the stimuli which evoke laughter for that group, they then become aware that they have been interpreting the laughter incorrectly, and acculturation has begun.

The process is, however, a difficult one as it was for one woman who was living in South-east Asia. She received word of the death of a close relative and was offended when one of her co-workers responded to her news with laughter. Years later, she was able to explain that for the individual the response was appropriate since it expressed their shock at hearing such bad news.

When individuals laugh together, they are establishing consensus and reaffirming norms. When a person's laughter is supportive of the communication of the others, the laughter builds trust between the individuals and positively sanctions their behavior or the ideas expressed in the communication to which the individual responded with laughter. When it is not automatic but is expected, people often feign laughter in order to indicate interest in a story or incident which is being related, or for reasons of courtesy, or so that the individual may include himself in the group. When the group around them laughs, individuals from a different cultural group may laugh in this way particularly when they understood the sentiment of the stimulus which provoked the laugh but did not understand precisely the specific meaning of the words used. When they do not participate at all, the laughter of the group often causes frustration and anxiety for the outsider and increases their feeling of alienation, making them more aware than before of the differences between themselves and the group who is laughing. Often the outsider will not understand why the group is laughing and will simply feel confused.

Humor comprises a build-up and release of tensions and the laughing response to humor is probably directly related to the extent to which the ideas communicated by the humor are appropriate to the situation. Perhaps it is because we feel good when we laugh, since laughter releases tension and pent-up energy and revitalizes the body, that we seek out situations which provide opportunities for laughter. It is interesting to note that the laughter of women in bisexual groups functions to support the communication and behavior of others in the group (Coser 1960, Grotjahn 1957). This laughter strengthens the supportive role which is the norm for many women in numerous societies. It is the woman's role to meet the needs of others and those needs include the release of hostility and

aggression made possible through situations in which laughter is appropriate, as well as to feel the security of being part of a group that shares and supports one's attitudes. Thus, the social norms which require women to be supportive, receptive and passive are keenly displayed in the laughing situation.

Perhaps it is because of the ambivalence of hostility and pleasure evoked by laughter that it functions within groups to control group behavior and establish norms. Actually, the aggressive properites of laughter provide the individual with a weapon, one which is considered socially acceptable, with which to strike out and attack the person or phenomenon which is bringing discomfort to the individual or group. Laughter not only attacks, but for the one who laughs, it kills, annihilates and objectifies the object of derision. Thus, we are helpless against the weapon of aggressive laughter.

The laughter of ridicule, which is directed at the error, deformity, weakness or predicament of some other person is an example of offensive laughter. Particularly for individuals who are from a different culture or group it may be difficult to determine the factors which initiated the laughter of others. In this case, since the link between laughter and hositility is so strong, outsiders are often apt to feel self-conscious and to assume that the laughter is being directed at them. For example, when one foreign student was eating with a group of other students and was speaking with the person beside him, he became upset when the rest of the group broke into loud laughter at the antics of another student that he had not seen because he interpreted the laughter as directed at the difficulty he was having expressing himself. The most paranoid among us, each time they hear laughter, also believe themselves to be its target. Even people with little curiosity eventually become inquisitive of sustained laughter, and many people quickly ask, "What are you laughing at?"

Often the laughter of ridicule is directed at the behavior or customs of a different social or cultural group and functions to counteract any tendency to imitate the manners and customs of other groups, since we are not likely to adopt those things at which we have laughed. Bergson (1911) went so far as to say that the purpose behind laughter is to humiliate and "...make a painful impression on the person at whom it is directed." Laughter holds the power to openly censure because, when one, or any object to which one feels a certain degree of affiliation, is the object of laughter then the person feels ashamed and embarrassed just as if they had been directly criticized.

Although the act of laughing is often associated with the release of tension as a result of repressed hostility, aggression and sexual desires or fear, embarrassment and frustration, we consider it pleasant and use it to communicate. Significance is added to laughter as a result of the individual's linking it with innumerable specific concrete experiences. Individuals who know each other well will be better able to differentiate their reflex, automatic, and voluntary laughter than total strangers or mere acquaintances. Where the laughter is predictable, the message is most likely to be understood. The degree to which a voluntary laugh can hold symbolic significance for the laugher and the listeners will depend upon consensus. Unfortunately, the more information encoded in the laughter the less predictable it becomes and the greater the chance the message will not be fully understood by the listener.

Since the use of the symbolic code varies among cultures and groups and their fears, frustrations, tensions and desires are not always the same, people from different backgrounds do not necessarially share the same informative stimulus for automatic laughter. The automatic laughter will, however, communicate about those tensions and hostilities to which

it is a response. By the laughter the individual communicates a feeling or attitude. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of the communication, particularly in cross-cultural situations, makes it extremely difficult for individuals to accurately identify what initiated the laughter and misunderstandings and misinterpretations often occur.

Whether the laughter is an automatic response to a situation or is intentionally initiated, it can function as a mask--a way of expressing an emotion without defining the expression with words, of asking for attention, of vocalizing a need, of expressing empathy, of covering embarrassment, or of punctuating a conversation and vocalizing the silences.

Conclusions

Thus, in intercultural situations, reflex laughter is the only manifestation which is a sign whose meaning is constant and understood across cultures. Automatic laughter, because of its relationship to the repressions of the individual and socially learned behavior is highly ambiguous. Within groups which are heterogeneous, the laughter will not, of necessity, function to unite the group and establish and reinforce norms. On the contrary, it may be disruptive, creating misunderstandings and tension. Only when people share the same attitudes or are able to overcome their differences will they laugh together spontaneously and share the benefits of the experience. For those who are outsiders, the laughter of the group may have negative affects. At the very least, they will be reminded of their differences, which stem from the numerous specific experiences that affect the development of each individual and form the basis of their repressions. Symbolic laughter, between individuals from different backgrounds, may not be understood at all. However, since it is intentional communication, the context in which it is used will help the listener to

interpret it correctly. The foreigner who is able to understand the message encoded in a symbolic laugh will have to correctly decode the contextual information as well. Laughter, therefore, is not a universal language even though it is used similarly within all cultures. At the intercultural level, rather than providing a pleasant means of communicating, laughter is risky, open to misinterpretation and a reminder of cultural differences.

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